

SPONSA CHRISTI

A PORTRAIT

By J. E. MOFFATT, S.J.



SPONSA CHRISTI

A PORTRAIT

By J. E. MOFFATT, S.J.

THE BRUCE PUBLISHING COMPANY
MILWAUKEE

Imprimi potest: HAROLD O. SMALL, S.J., Praep. Prov.
Oregoniensis
Nihil obstat: JOHN A. SCHULIEN, S.T.D., Censor librorum
Imprimatur: ✠ MOSES E. KILEY, Archiepiscopus
Milwaukiensis
November 10, 1948

Copyright, 1948, The Bruce Publishing Company
Made in the United States of America

TO MY SISTERS
BRIDES
OF THE
INFINITE BRIDEGROOM



S P O N S A C H R I S T I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Sponsa Christi, Bride of the Infinite Bridegroom, how sublime is your holy vocation! With what astonished awe must not the angels of heaven contemplate a creature of earth so uniquely favored! Spouse of Christ! Bride of the Word Incarnate! Who shall tell the grandeur of your place in the plan of creation! Think what it implies in terms of infinite love. Think of the sacred obligations it entails.

Ages before the creation of the world, aeons before the first heavenly spirits began to choir their unceasing "*Sanctus*" before the throne of the Almighty, in the awful solitude of the unbeginning ages of His eternal existence, God saw you, was enamored of you, and chose you

for an intimacy of relationship with Him, surpassed, amongst women, only by that of the Immaculate One whom He had chosen as His Mother. One only could He exalt to the astounding heights to which Mary was exalted, yet would He lavish upon your soul such treasures of grace that He would see in you a reflection, as it were, of that peerless Virgin.

Lord and Master of His creation, He could have reserved for you, in token of His love, the pinnacle of worldly glory. He could have placed you upon a throne and clothed you in queenly dignity before which your fellow beings would fall down in glad acknowledgment of your unequaled worth. This He could have done, for He is God. But to satisfy the infinite love He bore you, this did not suffice. Compared with that which He eternally decreed for you, all earthly greatness is as merest dross and worthy only of contempt. For you He reserved the very best that even He, the Almighty, could give. *He would make you actually His Spouse.*

Bride of the infinite Bridegroom, object of the unique affection of the Heart of Jesus, how holy you must strive to be, in view of the wondrous grace with which you have been favored! Let me, therefore, sketch for your consideration a portrait, in broad outline at least, of a Spouse of Christ such as I feel the adorable Master would have her be and such as you must strive to be for the glory of your infinite Lover.

HER LOVE OF GOD

The Spouse of Christ realizes that she exists ultimately for one purpose: to love her God and be beloved by Him. Within her soul she hears the pleading cry still echoing from the Cross: "I thirst . . . I thirst for love," and of her heart she forms a chalice more precious than the golden cup upon the altar, fills it to the brim with love, and offers it unceasingly to quench the thirst of her Beloved. Her very life is one act of love. No word falls from her

lips, no desire is harbored in her breast, no action is performed without love of Jesus as its motive. Her very being breathes love. It is with an act of love upon her lips that she greets each newborn day. Love permeates each toilsome hour as it slips away, and it is with love throbbing in her heart that she closes her eyes in sleep when night comes down. Consecrated to love, she gives her whole heart, her whole mind, all her strength, every moment of her time, her very self without reserve to that for which alone she lives. She knows that her Beloved is a jealous Lover who will suffer no rival to her love, who will share with no other her heart's affection. He will have her *whole* heart all for Himself and she gives it to Him gladly. He will have *all* her love without reserve and she withholds no part of it for self or for creatures. All other love that has place in her life is in Him and for Him and is only another phase of her love for Him.

Like every true lover, she is preoccupied

with her Beloved. Her heart is ever busy with Him. Of happy necessity, urged by the ardor of her love, she is ever dreaming of Him. As the needle of the compass always turns to the North, so her thoughts, when released from attention to necessary tasks, turn with the instinct of love to the Heart of her Divine Lover. The uninitiated might wonder at the calm but heavenly joy that radiates from her countenance and suggests a blessedness that is not of this world, but those privileged to share her secret know that it is but the overflow of the interior happiness of her soul as she lives her life of love in the inner sanctuary of her virginal heart alone with her Beloved.

Ofttimes the duties that occupy her days are in themselves commonplace, colorless tasks that weary the body and harrow the soul. Long hours of nerve-racking toil in the classroom or hospital ward, or exhausting labor in the kitchen or laundry may be her portion; to her, however, there is nothing drab in her God-

appointed occupation, for the light of love suffuses every lowly task and transforms it into a thing of blessedness and beauty.

Generosity is the law of her life, and never satisfied that she is doing enough for her Beloved, she always longs to do more. Her day is long. She rises early and her duties often occupy her far into the night, but her habitual question is not "Am I bound to do this?" or "Am I obliged to do that?" but rather "Is there something more that I can do for God and souls?" She is often frail in body and delicate in health, but her self-forgetting love of her Lord makes such considerations of minor importance, or better, of no importance at all.

Comfort, amusement, self-indulgence, she will cheerfully sacrifice when the interests of her Beloved demand, and she allows herself only the relaxation necessary for the efficient discharge of her duties in the service of God. Mindful of her exalted status as a Spouse of the immaculate Bridegroom, she carefully shuns the slightest

danger to the spotlessness of her heart or anything that will dissipate in the least degree a mind that must be ever occupied with God and the interests of her Beloved. Worldly recreations she leaves to worldlings. Indeed, she allows herself no indulgence that her Immaculate Mother would not willingly be a part of.

HER MODESTY

Marylike modesty clothes the Spouse of Christ with a virginal beauty which is at once her irresistible charm and her strong defense, and marks her as one who is as different from the woman of the world as day from night. A coarse or indelicate word never crosses her lips, and the frivolous language of worldlings is utterly foreign to her. Her voice is soft and gentle, and her laughter, while hearty and infectious, is subdued by a delicate sense of supernatural refinement. There is something queenly about her whole bearing, though she is utterly un-

affected and incapable of artificiality. The modesty of her demeanor bespeaks her poise of spirit and perfect self-control. She is a lady in the most beautiful, sacred sense of the word. Rivaling the angels in all that makes for the angelic virtue, she exerts a chastening influence upon all with whom she comes in contact and turns their thoughts to her whom we honor as the Immaculate One.

HER HUMILITY

Like unto her who said of herself, "He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid," the Spouse of Christ walks the path of humility and deems herself the least in her religious family. She is astounded at the graces God has conferred on her and is convinced that they have been granted solely out of compassion for her misery and not in consideration of any personal merit. Whatever her aptitudes and abilities, she recognizes them as the property of her adorable

Spouse loaned to her and to be used for His greater glory.

In her Community she prefers the lowliest tasks and shrinks from aught that might elevate her above companions or bring honor or distinction. Her one desire is to be "unknown and esteemed as nothing" even within her Community; and should obedience place her in a position of authority, she demeans herself as the servant of her Sisters and offers them in her person a living example of Marylike humility.

Corrections, admonitions, and rebukes she receives with Christlike meekness and in a spirit of gratitude. Neglect, ill-treatment, humiliations, persecution, and injustice—should she encounter these in the inscrutable designs of God's divine providence, all are accepted as choicest gifts from her Beloved since in them she finds a precious opportunity of gaining something of His likeness.

In her youth she venerates her elders, and with wisdom born of true humility, eagerly seeks

their guidance and yields to their judgment. In her maturer years she looks with motherly affection upon her youthful companions, and by the exactitude of her observance, is for them a model of religious perfection.

HER LOVE OF OTHERS

Filled with the love of God, the Spouse of Christ necessarily is a model of charity toward her fellow human beings. Within the bosom of her religious family she fulfills to perfection the "New Commandment" of the Master and strives to love her companions as she knows she is loved by Him. As He died for love of her, she dies to self for love of them. She never harbors an unkind thought, she never utters a wounding word, she never performs a deed that could bring pain to another.

But her charity is not merely negative. Like her Beloved she "goes about doing good" and always looks for opportunities of bringing joy

and gladness into the lives of her Sisters. Dead to self and selfish interests, she is alive to the joys and sorrows of her companions and enters heartily into all that makes for the gladness or the sadness of their lives. When they suffer her heart bleeds, and when they rejoice she adds to their joy by sharing their happiness with them. With a heart as tender as a mother's, she is ever ready with the balm of comfort for a suffering companion, and her sisterly love senses the pain even when it is hidden in the depths of a silently agonizing heart. Strict with herself and generous to an extreme with others, she overlooks the human frailties of her Sisters and can always find an excuse for their defects and failures. Indeed, she is seldom aware of the deficiencies of others, for she has schooled herself to see only the beautiful things in the lives of her companions. If she is in a position of authority, she is at times obliged to correct and reprove, but the Christlike gentleness and supernatural love with which she performs the painful

duty removes the sting from any unavoidable wound as soon as it is made.

Burdened with a multiplicity of duties, she has little time for personal interests and the innocent diversions that find their legitimate place in the life of even the most saintly religious. She is, however, beforehand with her Sisters and gladly sacrifices her few leisure moments to lighten their burden by helping them with their tasks. Her charity is so sincere that the favored ones are made to feel that in serving them she is the recipient of the favor.

Genuine in her charity as in everything else, her love for her Sisters is all-embracing, and each is made to feel that she shares equally with the rest in her sisterly affection. There will be times when she must suffer from the thoughtlessness of others, or even, perchance, on rare occasions, from deliberate unkindness or injustice; but far above vindictiveness, she readily forgives all injuries, banishes all temptations to bitterness or resentment, and rejoices in the opportunity of

bearing something for her Beloved, who suffered immeasurably greater injuries for love of her.

HER POVERTY

On the day of her profession the Spouse of Christ vows to be poor like her Beloved, and as the years go by she takes care that there be no rapine in the holocaust. In the fulfillment of this sacred pledge and in a spirit of loyalty to her Community she strictly observes the Common Life, shrinking from all exemptions or from the enjoyment of more or better material things than her companions are granted. Emulating the spirit of her saintly models, whenever possible, she chooses the poorest in clothing, lodging, and conveniences. Even the privation of necessities does not disturb her, and her unvarying study is to get along on as little as she reasonably can. So dear to her is her Beloved, so utterly all-satisfying, that her heart is per-

fectly detached from all that is not God. Thus, truly "poor in spirit," she enjoys the blessedness promised by the Master, and her heart is a veritable "kingdom of heaven" wherein her Beloved is pleased to make His abode and wherein He lavishes the choicest treasures of His love.

But her spirit of poverty is more than detachment from material things. Her *All* is her Beloved, and as a consequence she is utterly detached in spirit from even the interior spiritual possessions of the soul. She is not discouraged if she sees herself surpassed by others in spiritual strength, in facility in prayer, and virtue. She is not saddened if she finds herself devoid of the attractive qualities of mind and heart with which her companions are endowed. Nor does it disturb the peace of her soul or affect the quality of her service in her allotted tasks if she receives no praise or recognition for her painful efforts, nor ever a word of gratitude for the toil that is gradually consuming her life.

She hopes for no reward and desires none save that which her Beloved has reserved for her, and she would serve Him with equal zeal all the days of her life were there no reward awaiting her when life's journey is over, for she deems it a reward all-sufficient just to be allowed to serve so sweet a Lover.

Impelled by the ardor of her love, she sets no limits to her spirit of sacrifice and divests herself of that which man finds hardest to yield — her will and judgment to be disposed of as it pleases her Beloved. When she accepted His invitation to become His Spouse, she freely gave herself to Him that He might do with her as He pleased, and she expects Him to take her pledged word literally. Every action of her life is regulated by His will. She has no word, nor does she wish it, in the ordering of her day or the disposing of her time. The voice of obedience, in which she hears the voice of Jesus, determines what she is to do and how and when she is to do it. No task is so humble, no duty

so painful, no order so harsh, that she ever utters a word of complaint. Prompt and cheerful in her obedience, she responds at the first sound of the bell or the voice of her Superior, and within her heart she whispers lovingly, "I come, sweet Jesus," as she hastens to her post. It matters not that her task be contrary to her preferences, nor that the order demands of her what seems unreasonable, nor that it comes in a way that is harsh and painful. For the true Spouse of Christ one thing alone matters: that the will of her Beloved be accomplished; and she would travel to the end of the earth and give the last breath of her life to accomplish it.

HER OBSERVANCE OF THE RULE

Thoroughly supernatural in outlook, the Spouse of Christ suffers no anxiety as to what the will of her Beloved may be, for besides the voice of her Superior who speaks in His name, she has the holy Rule which is a detailed ex-

pression of His good pleasure in her regard. In the noviceship she learned the meaning of the Rule, and her love for it is strong and deep and tender. Loyalty to her Community and love for our Lord make its perfect observance a matter of conscience, and she is delicately exact even in its least detail. With a nicely balanced judgment and perfect good sense she knows where necessary exceptions have legitimate place, but with the courage and generosity of St. John Berchmans she would "rather be torn to pieces than deliberately violate a single Rule" even though it bind not under pain of sin. When there is question of principle she is anything but a weakling.

Endowed with singular courage and with a holy independence of the opinion of creatures, she is, however, far from antagonizing her companions by her faithful observance of the Rule. She knows how to make virtue lovable, and, save for rare and unfortunate exceptions, the beautiful example of her lovable holiness is

infectious in her Community and spurs her weaker companions to follow her lead.

HER LIFE IN CHRIST

True Spouse of Christ, she makes His interests her own and spends herself without counting the cost for advancing them. She knows that howsoever she may be engaged, the purpose of all her activity is the same as that for which her Beloved came from heaven to earth and suffered and died: the saving and sanctifying of souls for God's greater glory. To this "divinest of all divine works" she gives herself without reserve. To save a single soul, nay, to prevent a single sin, she would gladly give her life. To this glorious end she dedicates her strength, her talents, and her time. But with supernatural wisdom she realizes that the greatest good for the cause of Christ will not be attained by the exterior activity of her life but rather through the interior sanctity of her soul. She is aware

that the work in which she is engaged is co-operation with Christ, our Lord, in establishing the kingdom of His love in the hearts of men. She knows that this is essentially a supernatural work and she avails herself of every means her religious life affords of drawing ever closer to the Source of Grace, the Sacred Heart of her Adorable Spouse, that she may channel that grace to the souls of men. In her morning meditation and in all her pious exercises, but especially in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and in the daily Eucharistic visit of her Beloved to her heart, she drinks deep draughts from the Fount of Grace until she becomes, as it were, saturated with the divine life which she communicates to souls. Not only, however, during the periods dedicated to formal prayer and exercises of devotion does she draw from the "Fountains of the Saviour." There are the precious "moments in between" which she spends before the tabernacle in silent loving union with her God. Hither her steps turn when a moment

of freedom is offered, and hither, too, her affectionate thoughts return in the midst of busy duties from dawn till dark. Walking hand in hand with her Beloved along the journey of life, striving ever to "put on Christ," the words of the Apostle are ever more perfectly fulfilled in her: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me."

HER EXAMPLE

Within her Community and in her contacts with outsiders the Spouse of Christ radiates Christ. His virtue goes forth from her. Through her modest eyes He looks out with loving compassion on the miseries of the world. With her lips He speaks words of comfort or kindly admonition. In her He relives His earthly life. Through her instrumentality He draws souls to His Sacred Heart. Though her voice is never heard from the pulpit, her saintly life is a silent sermon calling souls irresistibly to the love of God. She knows wherein the strength of the

apostle lies. She knows that it is only virtue that can conquer vice, and that gigantic virtue must oppose gigantic vice. That she may be a giant in the fray she sets herself to the task of measuring up to the stature of Christ. She is determined to become a saint for the glory of God, and, cost what it may, she will accomplish her purpose.

HER SANCTITY

Holiness is indeed the great ambition of the Spouse of Christ; but she is not one of those deluded persons who fondly, but foolishly, await occasions for heroic deeds to attain the goal of sanctity. She knows that opportunities for individual acts of heroism are rare in the life of any religious. She has learned from the experience of the ages that saints are fashioned out of the most ordinary material that is ever abundantly at hand. With practical good sense, she "gathers up the fragments" of those commonplace duties and colorless sacrifices and

seemingly trifling graces that lie scattered profusely along the path of every life. Silence in word and action, modesty in all its details, charity in thought and word and deed, patience in vexations, a smile or a kindly word to one who has given offense, a headache generously borne, a heartache silently endured, disappointment uncomplainingly accepted, meekness when unjustly rebuked, resentment stifled and self-pity crushed — these are the fragments she ceaselessly gathers. They are shapeless and often unattractive bits, but cementing them together with love day by day, she gradually pieces together a beautiful mosaic which, completed when life's day is done, will be a masterpiece of sanctity to charm eternally the eye of her Beloved.

HER SPIRIT OF SUFFERING

When trials come, and they must come, she meets them with unfaltering courage and without sadness or bitterness of heart. She knows

that there is no holiness without suffering, and that apostolic fruitfulness is had only at the price of pain. As the candle must be burned away in giving light, she knows that she must be consumed in the flames of suffering and trial that she may light the way for souls through the darkness of sin and error to the Heart of God. She knows that "unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." So also, in order that she may be abundantly fruitful of souls saved and sanctified for her Beloved, she is quite willing to die to self in the crucible of suffering. She knows that it was as a Victim, and only thus, that Christ won the graces for the saving of souls and the fashioning of saints. While scorning self-pity in suffering and never posing as a "martyr" in the time of trial, her dearest desire is to be a Host with and like her Beloved. At times nature tempts her to "come down from the cross" of uncompromising generosity in the pursuit of sanctity and "save

herself" in a life of mediocrity. But she does not falter. Lifting her eyes to the blood-dripping Victim on Calvary's cross, she seals anew her pledge of loyalty. No one on earth suffers more beautifully or more meritoriously than a true Spouse of Christ.

HER ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE

Swiftly the years of her earthly exile are counted off. They may be many or they may be few, but as they pass they leave no regrets in her heart. She is happy to see them go, for their passing means that the blessed hour of her dreams is nearer when she will meet her Beloved face to face and be received into His eternal embrace. Time has value in her eyes only as a preparation for eternity, and as she journeys the way of life she keeps her eyes fixed on the Eternal Hills. With St. Aloysius, the norm by which she determines her attitude toward all the big and little things of life is the

question: "Quid hoc ad aeternitatem?" — "How does this look in the light of eternity?" With St. Stanislaus she is ever reminding herself: "Ad majora natus sum," — "I was born for higher things, than the things of earth and time" — and she tramples under foot as unworthy of her attention all that worldlings cherish. Her "conversation is in heaven" and the hunger and thirst of her heart are solely for her Beloved and the joys of Everlasting Life.

HER GROWTH IN GRACE

As her life's journey lengthens her supernatural beauty grows apace. More of heaven than of earth on the never-to-be-forgotten day when she became a Spouse of Christ, the beauty of her holiness has increased with each passing year. Life in Religion has never become commonplace to her. Her holy habit becomes more precious as the years go by than it was when she first wore it. She never "gets used" to the

marvelous privilege she enjoys as one of God's elect. Thus, blessed with a healthy spirituality, there is constant growth in her supernatural life, constant advance toward the sacred ideal proposed to her in the divine command: "Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." If in the days of her novitiate fervor she strove for the perfection of religious observance, the passing of the years sees even greater exactitude and delicacy in all the details of her duties as a Spouse of Christ. Silence and modesty and childlike obedience, poverty and recollection and the spirit of prayer, and those things that make for otherworldliness in every phase of her holy calling — all virtues have increased in her. The flame of love for God that glowed in her heart on the day of her holy Profession grows daily in ardor until it becomes an all-consuming fire gradually burning away the last frail barriers that separate her from perfect union with her Beloved.

HER ETERNAL UNION WITH GOD

At last the end will come. Within her soul will sound the loving invitation: "Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come. For the winter is now passed, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land. The voice of the turtle is heard. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come." It is the voice of the Bridegroom coming to take her home. Wise virgin that she is, she is ready for His coming. Her lamp is filled with oil and brightly burning. With joyful expectation, rather than resignation, she loosens her grasp from all things of earth, turns gladly aside from its sights and sounds, and, with a sigh of love, yields up her virgin soul into the tender embrace of her infinite Lover.

For her "to live was Christ, to die is gain."



